

# Creativity in bipolar disorder: A systematic review of the literature

# Bipolar Currents

## What is this research about?

This is a scientific review of the current research on the link between bipolar disorder and creativity. More people with bipolar disorder are creative than the general population and similarly, there is a higher prevalence of the condition among creative people. Creative achievement and output is higher for individual's living with milder forms of bipolar disorder and with relatives of people with bipolar disorder. The condition is linked to temperament and achievement in the arts. The authors develop a provisional model that captures why bipolar disorder might relate to the creative process; raising the possibility that the link between creativity and bipolar disorder occurs due to personality, lifestyle, or mood. They also consider treatment challenges and opportunities. The provisional model demonstrates where the personality profile overlaps with the creative process. Building on the review of research and the provisional model, the authors focus on challenges of a creative life for people with bipolar disorder, as well as key therapies. Finally, the authors offer suggestions for guiding treatment and developing testable hypotheses for further research.

## What did the researchers do?

Drs. Murray and Johnson systematically reviewed literature on the link between bipolar and creativity. They first defined in detail the topics of interest - creativity and bipolar. They then consulted literature on personality, motivation, cognition and mood to identify the predictors of creativity and considered those that overlap with for bipolar disorder. They present a visual model of the relationship, and discussion of the overlap between bipolar disorder and the two core parts of creativity: *generativity and novelty* (creating something original); and *consolidation and usefulness* (putting it together in a finished work). Of concern are aspects of personality and mood common to bipolar disorder, that might enhance or obstruct creativity. Mania, for instance may generate much that is novel and original with little that can be completed or made useful. The authors demonstrate how creative lifestyles create challenges for treating and living well with bipolar disorder. They discuss medication and creativity, and also provide an overview of talk therapies, highlighting the importance of tailoring treatment to the creative person.

## What do you need to know?

The link between bipolar and creativity is familiar enough to find a place in popular culture, where the 'mad genius' or 'crazy artist' is a type of folk hero. Certainly, not everyone with bipolar disorder is more creative than the average person, and not everyone who excels in the creative arts has a mood disorder. In each case however, the association exists but the relationship is far from simple. Research into the 'why?' is relatively new. Creativity is a positive quality that can be very rewarding, but it comes with risks that create a challenging situation for people with bipolar disorder. For example, creative lifestyles are linked to vulnerability to manic episodes. The life of a musician or actor, for example, could include irregular hours, and uneven rewards and recognition. Healthcare providers need to take into account not only the best research evidence about bipolar disorder, but the characteristics, values and context of the person being treated. Creative people may have different values, lifestyles and ways of thinking and feeling about treatment.



## What did the researchers find?

The authors' found that bipolar disorder and creativity overlap in a number of ways. Traits common to people with bipolar disorder may provide good conditions for creative accomplishment, whereas severe mental illness disrupts it. The nature of creative work and lifestyles, together with personality, creates risks to treatment. Intense emotion, openness to experience and impulsivity are common to bipolar personalities and to creative workers. Artists have uneven career paths and rewards, irregular schedules, and financial challenges. The authors find evidence that medication generally enhances creative success in the long-term, however creative people may not be motivated by goals of 'normalcy' and 'stable mood'. Several psychosocial therapies are found to be effective for people with bipolar disorder, and the authors suggest that treatment providers bring an awareness of the characteristics of creative people and lifestyles to the therapeutic process.

## How can this research be used?

Given the likelihood of encountering creative people in their practise, clinicians who work with people with bipolar disorder can consult this research to better understand the motivation, thinking, lifestyle and risks particular to this population. Researchers can build on the provisional model to generate new hypotheses on the link between creativity and bipolar disorder, or other expressions of personality and/or mental illness. Artists with bipolar disorder and other creative individuals, who experience a range of moods and experiences, may find this review relevant and useful.

**Key Words:** Bipolar disorder, creativity, personality, positivity affect, psychosocial treatments

### Further Reading

\* Murray G & Johnson SL. (2010). The Clinical significance of creativity in bipolar disorder. *Clinical Psychology Review* (30)6: 721-732.

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\*Bipolar Current based on this original scientific publication

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With thanks to author Arif Jinha in collaboration with Dr. Sheri Johnson | The Bipolar Current template has been adapted from: ResearchImpact (2010). "ResearchSnapshots": <http://www.researchimpact.ca/researchsearch/>